

Acts 4:1-31 When God is Big!

When I was in college, I was interning at a church. And the senior pastor graciously gave me opportunities. And one of my first speaking opportunities was a devotion to open up the weekly prayer meeting. One of the associate pastors was going to be there to evaluate me so I was nervous. I also knew that there would be other church leaders there and I wanted to impress them. It was only a 10-15 minute devotion but I labored over that devotion for hours. I thought I prepared something really solid. So I get up to speak and everything is going okay. But about 5 minutes in I glanced over at this associate pastor and his head was tilted back and his eyes were closed. That is the most heartbreaking thing for a speaker to see. I tried to tune that out and even hoped that maybe he was just meditating on the profundity of what I was saying. But my suspicion was confirmed when during a pause I could hear his heavy breathing, which was teetering on the edge of a snore. It was crushing. I was tempted to throw something at him but more than anything it caused me to ask a bunch of questions, “am I a bad speaker? Do I need to rethink this whole ministry thing? What will he say to others?” A couple days later I met with the senior pastor and he asked me how it went. I said, “Well, I guess it didn’t go very well. When I can’t even hold the pastor’s attention I did something wrong.” The senior pastor just laughed and said “don’t worry about it. He does that all the time. He is always on the go so when he sits down he often dozes off.” I felt so relieved. But for a few days I had been stewing over what this person thought of me and how that might affect others.

This is just a small example of a universal problem: that we are so often controlled by the approval of others. We are often obsessed with what others think of us. Whether it shows up in giving in to peer pressure or living your life to please others or being co-dependent on someone else or feeling the need to speak about yourself to others or feeling the need to one-up someone or being undone by criticism, at some point we all struggle with a need for others to approve of us. Much of our interactions online are attempts to gain the approval of others. When criticism comes it can be crushing because we care so much what others think. When we aren’t appreciated the way we want to be or think we should be, it hurts because we want others to recognize us. When we are given the opportunity to correct someone else we often shrink back because we are afraid that it might damage the relationship. As Christians, most of us don’t talk to others about Jesus largely because of the fear of rejection or people thinking we are

weird. And if you deeply crave the approval of others then it will alter the way you live.

The Bible has a way of talking about this: its called the fear of man versus the fear of God. Fear in the Bible has a broad meaning and to live in fear of man is to care too much about what people think of us. Its a fear that is two sided: on one side it's an oversized craving for people's approval and on the other side it's an oversized fear of people's rejection. And ultimately the fear of man puts people in the place of God in our lives. We were made to stand in awe of God, to get our sense of worth and meaning and purpose from Him. And the fear of man is when we replace God with people, when God becomes small and people become big.

And fearing man instead of fearing God has disastrous effects. One of them is that you turn inward. So people are primarily there to meet your need of feeling approved. So it makes it impossible to fully love people instead of just using them. Our problem often in relationships is that we need other people more than we love them. Another danger is that it makes you timid. There is a serious lack of boldness in our lives because we live in fear of others. So we need a way to think less often about ourselves. We need a way to be bold in others lives.

We are in a series in the book of Acts witnessing the unstoppable movement of God through the early church. And in the early church we see a courage that is unflappable that led to the spread of the Gospel around the world. And in the passage we are about to read we will see a radical boldness in Peter and John that is rooted in God being bigger than other people. Peter and John are threatened and told to not speak of Jesus anymore and you will hear them say: you decide for yourself whether it is better to obey God or man but we cannot help but speak about the things we have seen and heard. They needed more for the approval of God than the approval of men. And ironically this led them and the early church to be able to love people more because they need them less.

Let's read Acts 4:1-22 (we will read 23-31 a little bit later)

1 And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day,

for it was already evening. 4 But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. 5 On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. 11 This Jesus[a] is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.[b] 12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men[c] by which we must be saved." 13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. 14 But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. 15 But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." 18 So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." 21 And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

Quick overview of what has happened. We saw last week how Peter and John heal a man lame from birth. This guy goes around walking and leaping and praising God. And everyone is filled with wonder: what is going on? How did this happen? And Peter seizes on the opportunity and preaches a message. And his point was: "don't think we did this by our own power. The Jesus that you put to death was the author of life and God raised him from the dead and it is by faith in his name that this man was healed."

You might think that this would have led to Peter and John being on the cover of Time Magazine as people of the year. But instead, we see here that they are thrown in jail and brought before the Jewish governing council.

Why were they so upset at Peter and John? It wasn't because they had healed a lame man but that they proclaimed that it was in Jesus' name that he was healed and that there is therefore no other name under heaven by which people can really be healed of what's wrong with us. It is only in Jesus Christ that we can be saved. Throughout the book of Acts, the church receives opposition from two fronts. They received persecution from the Jews and from the Romans. And both are because of this exclusive claim that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Christians received opposition from the Jews because Jesus didn't appear like the Messiah they had hoped for; they had hoped for a military hero who would crush the Romans. Many of the Jews didn't like the message from Peter that Jesus Christ is the savior of the world and not just the Jews. Some like the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. And many of the Jews rejected the idea that Jesus was God in the flesh. So the message that Peter preaches that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ was offensive to the Jews. Later on we see that this message was offensive to the whole Roman world. The Roman world was officially pluralistic: you can worship any god. Everybody has their own god but you must also worship the emperor. You must declare that Caesar is Lord. Christians couldn't do this. They could only say Christ is Lord. And this brought them into conflict with the Roman Empire.

So this claim to exclusivity (that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ) brought them into conflict with the Jews and with the Roman Empire. And this is no doubt similar to our day in many respects...we live in a pluralistic culture. We live in a culture that says that there is really no grand narrative or story that brings meaning and purpose to our lives but instead reality is whatever you decide it is. Truth is relative and the only sin in this kind of culture is saying that one way is the only way or true way. If you think the issues we face are new, they aren't. And in the early Christians we see a boldness in the face of this opposition.

So Peter and John are told: you mustn't speak about this Jesus character anymore. And they reply: "*whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to*

you rather than God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Where did their courage come from? It was the result of fearing God over man. God was bigger than other people. They were more concerned with the approval of God than they were with the approval of men.

I want to show you a few pictures. These are pictures of people who were recently baptized in the village where we just sent a mission team in January. There were 17 new believers baptized (and you all had a part in that). Ramachandra, the pastor that we support and work with over there, asked for prayer for these young believers because they are already facing persecution; they are being ostracized by their neighbors and family for placing their faith in Jesus Christ. For them, to surrender their lives to Jesus means trouble. So being baptized took courage. Specifically, it took courage to be more concerned with God and his approval than the approval of men. Many of the believers and pastors over there have been persecuted, thrown in jail, beaten, threatened, and ostracized by family and even whole villages. Yet they continue to speak boldly about Jesus. Why? Because they fear God; they desire more the approval of God than the approval of man. And when that happens in your life then you too are able to be bold and speak about Jesus because what God thinks matters more. You are able to handle criticism better because your greatest need isn't for someone else to approve of you. You are able to really love others because you don't need them for your sense of meaning and purpose so you can just love others.

These early Christians had this big view of God that dwarfed everything else. I want you to listen to their prayer in verses 23 and following.

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant,[d] said by the Holy Spirit, “‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’[e]—27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants

to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

It is remarkable that these Christians take five verses to tell God who he is, and two verses to ask what they want from him. Now God does not need to be told who he is. But Christians need to know who he is and remember who he is.

In the prayer, they identify God in two ways. First, they say he is the Creator of all things. They know that if God created everything in earth, sea, and heaven, then these elders and priests are his property and he can do with them as he pleases. If he created all things and holds all things together and rules over all things then surely he and he alone is to be feared and worshipped. Surely what is on his agenda is most important. Surely what he thinks and says to us holds more weight than others.

Second, they say that God is the one who is ruler of all, even the deeds of evil men. Peter quotes Psalm 2 and says that the psalm was fulfilled in the way God was in control when evil men killed Jesus. So many of the messages in Acts make this point: that while the Jews handed Jesus over to be crucified, it was all part of God’s plan. Don’t miss what that means. God is so sovereign that he rules over even the acts of the wicked. God is not the author of evil so man is still responsible but God is so amazingly sovereign that he weaves our sin and rebellion into his plans for his purposes. And what that means is that God is able to take even the worst of things in your life, the worst of evils, the worst of mistakes, the greatest betrayals, the darkest of nights and use those things for good purposes. Jesus is risen and the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. What people meant for evil, God meant for good.

Paul Tripp said this in his book, *Dangerous Calling*, “Wise, stable, and fear free living doesn’t require you to deny what you’re facing, but rather looks at whatever you are facing from the perspective of a gloriously freeing and motivating fear of the One who rules all the things that you would otherwise be afraid of. A functional awe of God really is the key to your heart not being ruled by fear.” Fear-free, stable, strong, courageous living is a result of seeing God as BIG and sovereign and powerful.

The believers pray for boldness to a God that they saw as BIG and notice the result in verse 31: and they were filled the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Boldness is the result of us seeing God as big.

A couple weeks ago, I was approached by a young man who is 13 years old and comes to EPIC. He wanted advice because he has a friend that he cares about and this friend has experienced a painful life and doesn't see how there could be a loving God. So this young man wanted advice. He said, "I've talked to my friend about Jesus and I just wonder: what's the best way to share the Gospel with him?" I was so encouraged and there was part of me that had this thought: where does this boldness come from? And then something struck me. There are times when I have been in the back on that side and we are singing. And in front of me is this 13 year old kid raising his hands, singing loudly and praising God. Do you see the connection? When God is big then it produces a boldness in our lives. The fear of God is rooted in the knowledge of God. The reason so many of our lives are full of timidity instead of boldness and worry instead of peace is because we don't know God well. Do you know God? Do you know his Word? Do times of prayer mark your life?

You will be controlled by the fear of something. You will stand in awe of something. You will live your life for the praise of someone. Who do you fear?

Martin Luther took a stand against the abuses of the church in his day and he proclaimed the error of its teaching and he was brought before an assembly of political rulers and church officials. The power of the assembly was enough to banish or execute him for heresy. The prosecutor asked him, "Do you defend all your works or do you care to reject a part?" Luther actually asked for time to think it over. He seemed to be teetering between fear of man and fear of God. But eventually he faced those who had the power to kill him and said: I must walk in the fear of the Lord. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.

We live with so many preoccupations about ourselves. Is my hair all right? Do these clothes make me look fat? Did I say the wrong thing just now? Do

they think I'm an idiot? Am I being admired right now? Is my superior degree, intellect, or status coming through? Do people like me?

The Bible tells us that one day we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ – and all these things that seem so important now will melt away as we are undone by His greatness.

On that day it won't matter to us what people thought about us. All the good opinions in the world won't weigh an ounce, and all the disapproval of people in the world won't mean a thing. Only God's approval and only His acceptance will mean anything and it will mean everything. And this is the amazing thing: because of the gospel, because of what Christ has done for us, He will raise us up and we will see in His eyes that we are accepted. For Christians on that day, our shame and nakedness will be covered by Christ's righteousness. We will see that God doesn't merely tolerate us but loves us and accepts us and approves of us – all because Jesus Christ died in our place. On that day we will see that that is more than enough. It is everything.

Walking in the fear of the Lord will help us to see that now. Because of Christ we are accepted by God – what more acceptance do we need? Because of Christ we are loved by God – do we need anyone else's love to be complete? And because of the gospel we are freed from the snare of fearing what people think and we can love people rather than need for their approval. We are freed from the constant inward gaze of self-consciousness and free to bend our gaze outward.

Living in the fear of the Lord is just that. God is big and life is in right perspective. It should be our prayer to walk in the fear of the Lord and as we do, we will know an amazing freedom from the fear of man.